

City population posts 10% growth



PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

The daytime population in Greenville is double what the census says, which presents challenges for services.

Greenville has ambition for more with annexation push

By Ben Szobody

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It's been roughly a decade since a cast of city officials, armed with aerial photos and maps, convened a meeting in which they began wooing a group of homebuilders long accustomed to building suburban neighborhoods where the land was cheap and easy.

City leaders had realized that Greenville's population wasn't going to grow itself.

"There was kind of a blind spot for about 20 years in the city about the importance of people," said

Mayor Knox White. "It was sort of accepted, oh yeah, people are going to live out in the suburbs."

Ten years into the effort, the city head count is starting to bulge, though the population growth is painstaking, including years of legal negotiations and an uphill campaign to urbanize housing in a region where it mostly sprawls.

To get Lieu's Chinese Bistro to join the city limits recently, numbers of city officials made repeated visits to the Woodruff Road site where the city line dances close to Mauldin's.

"Mauldin was eating a lot of Chi-

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nese food at the same time we were," said Councilman David Suduth.

To date, the city's estimated residential population of 61,782 remains unusually small, ranking behind not just Columbia and

See **CENSUS** on page 7A

CENSUS

FROM PAGE 1A

Charleston but also North Charleston, Rock Hill and Mount Pleasant.

This cripples the city when it comes to landing retailers and federal funding, both of which tend to hang on population calculations, White and Sudduth said. It often takes a direct sales pitch to convince a new store of Greenville's burgeoning metro area.

10 percent growth

Still, new census estimates offer evidence that the population push is working, showing a 10.3 percent uptick between 2000 and 2009. It's a double-digit measure of growth that hasn't been seen in decades, though it still trails state and county growth rates.

"It's significant to have any kind of turnaround," White said.

It's always been a riddle in Greenville, where the daytime population is more than double what the census says, where state law

makes annexation difficult and where the city is required to hammer out agreements with outlying fire districts wherever it adds land that affects them.

Even successful efforts to annex property have largely focused on the Interstate 85 corridor, where vast, undeveloped tracts held by the late textile magnate John D. Hollingsworth offered the city a chance to add property in advance of new housing and commercial development.

Greer has grown by pursuing such an annexation method, though Greenville has had fewer such options, White said.

Now, though, he predicts a more aggressive campaign to make the sales pitch to neighborhoods: Join the city, get intensive city services and possibly pay the same or less in total taxes and fees.

Mount Pleasant and North Charleston grew rapidly over the past decade in part because they approved sales taxes that allowed them to keep property taxes relatively low and thus persuade neighborhoods to join the city

without any appreciable uptick in the home tax bill, White said.

Greenville voted down a sales tax, and the city hasn't had that sales pitch until now, he said, noting that in some areas on the western side of the city, total taxes and fees are now actually higher outside city limits.

In general, it's still cheaper to live in the county's Eastside.

Annexation issues

A major block to annexing property is the legal tangle whenever the city adds property that pays taxes to other local fire districts.

The state requires the city to work out agreements with special purpose districts affected by such annexation. The city has so far completed one such agreement that allows the Wade Hampton Fire Department the option of continuing tax collections and fire service even after Greenville annexes property from within the district.

The agreement took about 10 years to work out,

That leaves the city with a two-pronged approach of redeveloping older neighborhoods and persuading neighborhood associations that they could be better off with the city's focus on things like speed humps, sidewalks and economic development.

As an eventual result of the meeting with homebuilders, White said a neighborhood of townhomes off Interstate 385 and Haywood Road took shape.

The new population estimate for 2009, meanwhile, hints at what the official census figures will show next year.



KEN OSBURN / Staff

This month Greenville annexed the Caledon Woods apartment complex on Pelham Road,

Sudduth said, adding that the city is now using it as a template in talks with the Parker Fire and Sewer Sub-district.

The legal conversation can take a long time, White said, but the city's pitch is simple: we add population, you keep the fire tax revenue.

For the residents themselves, the deals can make sense if the existing fire district can provide better fire service than the fixed city stations, White said.

Another sometimes contentious tool for the city is a water covenant that property owners sign if they're within a mile of city limits. In exchange for service from the Greenville Water System, the owner pledges to agree to future annexa-

tion in the event his property becomes contiguous with city limits.

Water rates in the county are 50 percent higher than what the system charges city residents.

Such a covenant, signed years ago, is what triggered this month's annexation of the Caledon Woods apartment complex on Pelham Road, Sudduth said, though the ultimate agreement still took several years.

There were multiple property owners and some confusion over the documents, Sudduth said, but ultimately the annexation brought 350 new residents into city limits.

City officials say they've talked recently of more aggressive annexation op-

tions, though White declined to name neighborhoods that could be candidates. Sudduth said he didn't know if more properties along Pelham, which is lined with residential developments, could soon trigger annexation by way of water covenants.

White has pointed for years at the state's stringent annexation laws, and getting them loosened is a perennial priority on the city's list of legislative goals for its lobbyists. So far, there's been little progress.